



TETANUS (Lockjaw)

What is TETANUS?

Tetanus (lockjaw) is an acute, often fatal disease caused by a toxin produced by the bacteria *Clostridium tetani*.

How does someone get Tetanus?

The bacteria that causes tetanus naturally occurs in soil. Any wound or cut contaminated with the soil, such as a puncture wound or even a pin prick, can provide a suitable environment for the bacteria. This disease is usually acquired when a person who has not been immunized acquires a wound by stepping on a dirty nail or being cut by a dirty tool. The bacteria infect the wound and produce a toxin that spreads through the blood, causing severe muscle spasm, paralysis and frequently death. The bacteria cannot survive in the presence of oxygen. They are also resistant to heat and the usual antiseptics.

Who can get tetanus?

Anyone who gets a wound or cut is at risk if they are not properly immunized against tetanus.

What are the symptoms?

The most common type of tetanus is the generalized form, indicated by lockjaw (spasms of the jaw muscles). Secondary symptoms are stiffness of the neck, difficulty in swallowing, and rigidity of the abdominal muscles. Spasms may occur frequently and can continue for three to four weeks. Complete recovery may take months.

How soon do symptoms appear?

It usually takes about eight days for symptoms to start. Symptoms can begin as early as three days after exposure to as late as 21 days post-exposure.

How is it treated?

Immunization, not antibiotics, is the most important treatment for tetanus. Tetanus Immune Globulin (TIG) is recommended. Active immunization with tetanus toxoid should begin as soon as the person's condition has stabilized. Persons with an uncertain history of prior immunization against tetanus need tetanus immune globulin (TIG) as well as tetanus toxoid.

What should I do if I get a puncture wound?

- Minor wounds: Clean the wound thoroughly with soap and warm water and leave uncovered, if possible.
- Severe injuries: See a health care provider for evaluation and treatment.
- Consult your health care provider if you develop signs of infection such as redness, warmth, swelling, tenderness or fever.

If I am injured, how do I know if I need a tetanus shot?

- For a **minor injury** - Get a tetanus shot if your last tetanus shot was over 10 years ago.
- For a **complicated or contaminated wound (including puncture wounds)** - Get a tetanus shot if your last tetanus shot was over five years ago.

How do I prevent the disease?

Prevent tetanus with a vaccine. Children who are less than seven years of age can receive DTaP vaccine (a combined vaccine against diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis, or whooping cough). Every 10 years, teenagers and adults should receive booster doses of Td vaccine (a combined vaccine against tetanus and diphtheria.)